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INTRODUCTION

If these pictures made people jump — or gave them an uneasy feeling — then Surrealist painters were satisfied. They hoped to jog viewers into a ‘crisis of consciousness’. During the 1920s their ideas challenged all art practices, and today their influence is still considerable.

Dada came first. Its origins lie in World War I when a few disaffected artists and writers were living in Zurich. Proposing that everything in the world was ‘bunk’, including art, these early conceptualists staged wild, nihilistic ‘happenings’ that quickly spread elsewhere.

Surrealism — soon to be an international movement — was launched in Paris in 1924 when the poet André Breton published a manifesto. His revolutionary message was that ‘rationalism’ was no longer a valid way of thinking or means of expression; he reasoned that the rationalist approach had led to World War I.

Claiming that the imagination and the irrational — in the form of dreams and the subconscious mind — were a neglected creative force, he thought that poets and artists should explore and express this in their work. Long ago Hieronymus Bosch had painted dreams and fantasies; Breton’s followers could go further and draw on Sigmund Freud’s psychological discoveries.
Looking at Dada and Surrealist art

‘As beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table’.

Latreamont, a Surrealist poet

Strange mixing
The concept of assembling unrelated objects in unnatural surroundings is a key element in Surrealist literature and art. To maximise impact, Magritte and Dali often show the subjects of their paintings with near-photographic realism — cool and calculated in manner. Their work suggests that objects have been cut from a magazine and carefully pasted into position, like a collage. This method can be traced from the less realistic style of de Chirico’s The Uncertainty of the Poet, 1913 to Nash’s Landscape from a Dream, painted in the late 1930s. De Chirico’s classical sculpture of a torso twists in traditional contraposto away from a large bunch of bananas, while Nash shows a bird of prey transfixed by its own image in a mirrored land and seascape. One of the best examples seen here is Man Ray’s painting: Observatory Hour, the Lovers, where giant female lips float over a landscape.

Dismembered parts
Surrealists made repeated use of certain motifs and images. In many of the pictures, parts of bodies are displayed — lips, arms, torsos. Where complete figures are shown they tend to resemble mannequins rather than real people. These paintings are populated by creatures that might haunt our dreams and nightmares — distant, gesticulating but not speaking. The landscape in which these figures or dismembered bits operate is infinite, silent. Skies vary from blue and cloudless to still and heavy but they seldom provide relief from the oppressive atmosphere, and compound the sense of foreboding.

Dali turns the screw further by adding decay and decomposition or hard objects melting and becoming flaccid — like the clocks in Persistance of Memory. However, by distorting the images and not presenting them as they should be, he reintroduces the notion of painterly quality. (This effect is not clear in reproduction.) As a result his paintings are intriguing but less disturbing. His clever ideas coupled with slick handling of paint and painstaking detail appeal to many pupils, particularly at KS 3.

When an artist uses his ‘inner self’ as a starting-point paintings become difficult to decipher. Miró felt his lonely youth enabled him to unleash childlike, flat, patterned motifs of impish figures which typify his work. His images have universal appeal, and he invented an amazing vocabulary for describing birds and animals in paint.
Part 5 — **Looking at the images**